

Introduction to Cultural Studies

Lecture 7: Visual Culture (3) – Documentary Film

1) Documentarism, Old and New

2) *The Human Body* (BBC1, 1998)

3) *Windrush* (BBC2, 1998)

1) Documentarism, Old and New

Documentary novel:

A form of fiction invented by Edmond and Jules Goncourt (1822-96/1830-70) in the 1860s, setting out to write history 'which might have happened' based on research methods of historians and anthropologists, aiming for the highest possible degree of fidelity to life, to fact (realism > naturalism). In the 20th century this became a form of fiction which is based on documentary evidence in the shape of newspaper articles, legal reports, archives, and recent official papers, sometimes described as 'instant fiction'.

Examples: Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925)
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1966)
(considered the original 'non-fiction novel')

Documentary theatre:

A form of drama, related to epic theatre, which is propagandistic and didactic, and may make use of relatively recent history and documentary evidence of the kind provided by newspapers, reports, archives, official histories, diaries and journals.

Examples: Rolf Hochhuth, *The Representative* (1966)
Heiner Kipphardt, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1968)
Peter Brook, *US* (1969)

See also: Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Colour of Justice* (1999)
> tribunal play as 'verbatim play' relying entirely on the transcripts of the public inquiry in the wake of the murder of Stephen Lawrence
[cf. J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*]

Documentary film:

Motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education and entertainment. Documentaries have been made in one form or another in nearly every country and have contributed significantly to the development of realism in film [...] Documentaries also became popular in television programming.

Examples: Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922)
Man of Aran (1934)
John Grierson, *Drifters* (1929), *Night Mail* (1936)
[cf. *Encyclopedia Britannica*]

Documentary film techniques:

Actuality:	film footage of real life events, places and people, providing a record of real events as they unfold
Exposition:	occurs at the beginning and introduces themes and structure
Voice-over:	providing narrative focus, offering explanation, information and opinions
Interviews:	witnesses or experts are drawn upon to support the documentary's viewpoint or to provide comprehensive coverage of possible attitudes, generally adding a sense of realism
Archival footage:	functions as source material
Montage:	usually linked with what characters say, while montage sequences convey ideas through their specific order and patterning
Reconstructions:	illustrate and re-present factual information established through the documentary mode

Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.

(Nichols 2010, 14, original emphasis)

Most people carry inside their heads a rough notion of what a documentary is. [...] A 'regular documentary' often means a film that features sonorous, 'voice-of-God' narration, an analytical argument rather than a story with characters, head shots of experts leavened with a few people-on-the-street interviews, stock images that illustrate the narrator's point [...], perhaps a little educational animation, and dignified music.

(Aufderheide 2007, 10)

Keynotes of Documentary:

- 'empirical anchorage'
- reference to source material to provide documentary evidence
- contemporary or 'factual' reference
- 'objective' bracketing of subjectivity
- spectrum of functions:
propaganda – education – information – entertainment

2) *The Human Body* (BBC 1, 1998)

- seven-part documentary TV series, first shown on BBC One in 1998
- produced by the BBC and The Learning Channel
- presented by Sir Robert Winston, a popular scientist, doctor, and politician (Labour whip in the House of Lords)
- audience share on first showing: 38%
- won three British Academy of Television Awards, four Royal Television Society Awards, a Peabody Award, an International Monitor Award, a Silver Spire at the San Francisco International Film Festival
- DVD (including a 'Making of') released 2001
- German version: *Das Wunderwerk Mensch*

"Life inside the most complex mechanism on earth – our bodies – is explored and explained in this groundbreaking series. The latest imaging techniques allow us to travel through veins, down fallopian tubes and around the brain, to understand how our bodies work. Our minds, spirits and emotions are celebrated too in this compassionate series which charts not only life but death."

Episodes:

- 1) "Life Story" – exposition
- 2) "An Everyday Miracle" – conception and birth
- 3) "First Steps" – childhood (first four years)
- 4) "Raging Teens" – adolescence and puberty
- 5) "Brain Power" – adult capacities
- 6) "As Time Goes By" – natural progress vs. decline
- 7) "The End of Life" – death

Episodes directed by:

Richard Dale, Emma De'ath, Andrew Thompson, Peter Georgi, Christopher Spencer, Liesel Evans, John Groom

[> intro sequence (0:00-2:50)]

[> example of imaging quality: sperm on its way to the egg (magnified 1000x)]

Programmatic quote (41:04...):

The truth is: A knowledge of the science of life is only made complete by a knowledge of those living it. The human body is not just a biological machine. It's much more than that. It's a person. And in this series it is people who will tell us what the body's ever-changing story really means.

End quote (45:29...):

So this is the story of the human body – a tale of fantastic changes and amazing achievements, written over millions of years of evolution and told afresh by each of us during our lifetimes. It surely is the Greatest Story Ever Told, and every one of us has a part in it.

From newborn baby upwards, this line follows the journey we will all make through life. Each person is one year older than the last. All of us have a place somewhere along this line, looking forward, looking back, or perhaps a bit of both.

Seen like this, stripped of the trappings of wealth and status, we have one thing in common, the one place we all inhabit, the one vehicle we all travel in: it's the human body. Seeing your body in ways you've never seen it before, perhaps you will share my sense of wonder at how it shapes us all into who we are.

Media Contexts (cf. Van Dijk 2005):

A. Medical Imaging Technologies

- drawing/painting
- photography
- electrocardiography (ECG) and other inscription devices (1872ff.)
- X rays (Wilhelm Röntgen 1895)
- ultrasound
- endoscope
- Computed Tomography (CT) (based on X rays)
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) (based on magnetic fields)
- Positron Emission Photography (PET) (based on injected radioactive isotopes)
- Electron Microscope (EM) (magnifies up to half a million times)

B. Media Technologies

- (color) photography
- film
- television
- digital media

↓

van Dijk 2005:

- medical vs. media purposes
- seeing vs. curing

Verdicchio 2010:

- the popularisation of science
- structure and narrative form

Recent Developments:

2007/2010: *Incredible Human Machine* (National Geographic Television UK)

“With stunning footage and powerful first-hand accounts, National Geographic takes you on a fantastic journey through an ordinary, yet extraordinary, day in the life of the human body. We reveal its miraculous everyday workings – how we eat, breathe, walk on two feet and even process emotion.

Explore striking feats of medical advancement, from unique people who push the human body to its ultimate limits to real-time views of Aerosmith rocker Steven Tyler’s vocal chords! Through 10,000 blinks of an eye, 20,000 breaths of air, 100,000 beats of the heart, see how surprising and incredible a day in the life of a human really is.”

2011: *Inside the Human Body* (BBC/The Learning Channel)

“Michael Mosley embarks on an astonishing voyage through the world’s most complex organism – you.

Inside the Human Body takes us deep under our skin where we are dwarfed by even the smallest cell, where blood vessels become vast cathedrals and the tiniest cluster of cilia becomes an expansive forest.

Our body’s almost infinite ability to adapt and surprise us is illustrated by the stories of remarkable characters whose bodies allow them to do amazing things, live in incredible places and push their physiology to the limits. Spectacular photography shows human behaviour in super slow motion, revealing elements of ourselves that we are completely unaware of.”

[BBC website:

“Using spectacular graphics based on the latest science and stories of remarkable people around the world, Michael Mosley takes us on a fantastic voyage through our inner universe.”]

[> example of imaging quality: sperm on its way to the egg]

3) *Windrush* (BBC 2, 1998)

- four-part documentary TV series, first shown on BBC Two in 1998
- produced and directed by David Upshal
- won the 1999 Royal Television Society Award for best documentary series
- Contributors include
Lenny Henry, Jazzy B, Doreen Lawrence, Valerie Amos, Rosalind Howells, Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Ben Bousquet, Carroll Thompson, Charlie Williams, Cy Grant, Professor Stuart Hall, Ken Livingstone, Darcus Howe, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Columbus Deniston, Ulric Cross, Chris Blackwell, and Mike Phillips

The series was broadcast in 1998 to mark the 50th anniversary of the arrival in Britain of the Empire Windrush, the ship which brought the first wave of post-war West Indian immigrants, on 22nd June, 1948, bringing 492 passengers from Jamaica.

The four episodes are:

- 1) Arrival (c.1948 to 1958)
- 2) Intolerance (c.1958 to 1968)
- 3) A New Generation (1968 to 1988 and beyond)
- 4) A Very British Story (the contribution of the black community)

[opening sequence/exposition (0:35-4:44)]

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